



Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac

USS POTOMAC MINI-HISTORY

BY W. ABERNATHY

FDR's Texas Fishing Trip - May 1937

After dinner on April 27, 1937, FDR left the White House to overnight on his special train en route to New Orleans and a rendezvous with his Presidential Yacht USS Potomac.

The train remained in the rail yards overnight departing the next day at 6 AM¹. The log of his trip starting that day was prefaced by this quote from the Koran:

"Allah does not deduct from the allotted time of man those hours spent fishing."

The *Potomac* would give him 10 days "off the mortal clock" for this fishing trip in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Texas. He needed a break, especially from the stresses of sponsoring in Congress the "Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937," otherwise known as FDR's "Supreme Court packing plan," which was facing political headwind despite his 98.44% win of electoral votes in 1936.

His train pulled into New Orleans the next afternoon in time for a late lunch at Antoine's and a waterfront press conference. He was asked by the press to provide full coverage of his forthcoming trip, including the "fish stories."

Joined by his son Elliott Roosevelt, Ross T. McIntire, Edwin M. Watson and Potomac Capt. Paul H. Bastedo, the President spent that evening on board the destroyer, *USS Moffett*², anchored in the Mississippi River before departing early morning to meet with the Presidential Yacht waiting off the Texas coast. On the voyage off the shores of Louisiana and Texas, FDR used his stamp collection to occupy his time.

The destroyer *USS Moffett* and the *USS Potomac* rendezvoused at Aransas Pass, Texas, near Corpus Christi, where the President and his party transferred in the early evening on May 1. Not wasting any special time allotted from Allah, FDR went fishing on a small boat while the transfer was in progress and snagged a king mackerel to officially start the fishing trip.

Back to business that evening on board the yacht when the White House mail pouch arrived with 38 official documents to be signed including an extension of the Joint Resolution on Neutrality Act, which was due to expire at midnight. Although in 1937, FDR was politically advocating for U.S. neutrality in European conflicts including the Spanish Civil War, he would later move the country to engagement and confront the isolationist with his Lend Lease concept.

Still, the first fishing day was not over. FDR and his party had dinner, then fished off the quarter-deck for an hour, after which he retired for the day.

¹While FDR was en route to New Orleans, Eleanor Roosevelt had a full day of White House activities including having lunch with Amelia Earhardt.

²The *USS Potomac* and the *USS Moffett* would meet again in August 1941 when FDR transferred in secret from his yacht to the battleship *USS Augusta* to meet with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill for the Atlantic Charter Conference off the coast of Newfoundland. The *Moffett* provided destroyer escort protection on his clandestine voyage to Canada while the world thought FDR was on the *Potomac* fishing in New England waters.



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The next couple of days were at sea off Port Aransas fishing usually from small boats with random success. Elliott Roosevelt caught a five-foot, ten-inch tarpon on May 2. The next day they caught 12 tarpons from the fishing boats.

After fishing each day, when conditions permitted, dinner was served on the yacht and the fishermen were often joined by a steady stream of guests from ashore.

On the other side of the Atlantic on May 3, the German Zeppelin *Hindenburg* (LZ-129) left Frankfurt, Germany, on its second scheduled 1937 passenger-flight crossing to the United States. Stretching 804 feet from stern to bow, the airship carried 36 passengers and a crew of 61. For the next 58 hours while FDR and friends were on the *Potomac*, the *Hindenburg* traveled at approximately 78 miles an hour over the Atlantic toward Lakehurst's Navy Air Base in New Jersey. Although it was designed to be filled with helium, a non-flammable gas, the airship contained highly flammable hydrogen. The Americans then had a monopoly on helium and had imposed pre-war export restrictions on its export. It was noted that the Germans had preferred hydrogen which provided more economic lifting power than helium, increasing passenger carrying capacity.

On May 6, the *Potomac* off the coast of Port Aransas, Texas, received the Naval Mail Plane with work for FDR who signed 32 Acts of Congress and processed other documents before the plane took off for Galveston, Texas.

The next day FDR received a flash notice on the *Potomac* that the *Hindenburg* had caught fire while landing at Lakehurst Maxfield Field in New Jersey, killing 35 of the 97 people on board and an additional fatality on the ground. The live radio announcement by Herb Morrison of the tragedy in which he emotionally declared, "Oh, the humanity!" was recorded and immediately flown to New York and became part of America's first coast-to-coast news broadcast. Commercial "lighter-than-air" travel was over.

FDR immediately sent from the *Potomac* the following message:

*H.E. Adolph Hitler
Reich Chancellor,
Berlin.*

I have just learned of the disaster to the airship *Hindenburg* and offer you and the German people my deepest sympathy for the tragic loss of life which resulted from this unexpected and unhappy event.

ROOSEVELT

And received the following reply:

*H.E. Franklin D. Roosevelt
President of the United States
Washington.*

I thank your Excellency sincerely for the heartfelt words of sympathy which you have expressed to myself and the German people with regards to the disaster of which the airship *Hindenburg* was the victim.

ADOLPH HITLER

Later that day at a press conference on the Yacht, he was asked about the possibility of lessening restrictions on the U.S. exports of helium and the future of dirigibles following the *Hindenburg* disaster. He said he needed to talk to Secretary Ickes about the helium issue and thought the whole field of dirigibles was worthy of further study.



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Photo of Elliott Roosevelt with his father FDR's catch, probably from the guide boat "Hangover II."

Before the press conference the President had hooked a 77-pound tarpon from his fishing launch about a half mile off the bow of the *Potomac* where it was finally brought to gaff. He told the press and especially the photographers that he had arranged with the fish to be caught promptly at two o'clock in time for the press conference. FDR said he was having the fish mounted to be given to his son Elliott. The press asked if they had kept the fish waiting.

In addition to fishing, the President was regularly receiving visitors for meetings and dinners including Texas businessmen Sidney Richardson and Clinton Murchison. He also found time to visit Richardson's estate on Saint Joseph's Island.

After more fishing the following days, the USS *Potomac* arrived in Galveston, TX, at 8:00 AM to a 21-gun salute from Fort Crockett. The President returned to "mortal time" and left for Fort Worth to board a train to Washington, D.C.

On the train home, he reflected on the trip at a press conference in his dining room car shortly after leaving St. Louis, MO.

"Let me talk some more background for you. The objective of these trips, you know, is not fishing. You probably discovered that by this time. I don't give a continental damn whether I catch a fish or not. The chief objective is to get a perspective on the scene which I cannot get in Washington any more than any of you boys can. You have to go a long ways off so as to see things in their true perspective because if you sit in one place, right in the middle of the woods, the little incidents that don't mean a hill of beans get magnified by a President just as they do by a correspondent."

As the President returned by rail, the USS *Potomac* headed from Texas across the Gulf of Mexico to Miami and then up the Atlantic to Chesapeake Bay and its home berth at the Washington Navy Yard.

On May 14, at 10:15 AM, FDR's train arrived at the Washington, D.C. rail station where he was met by Eleanor Roosevelt and returned to the White House joined by Mr. and Mrs. Elliott Roosevelt.